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Memory: The Theatre of the Past

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Abstract: This paper explores curricula where a cultural study of texts offers opportunities for New South Wales high school students to consider the discourses and stories that have continued to preoccupy and shape their own society and lives these last hundred and fifty years. Walter Benjamin's astute observation that *Memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre* provides the starting point for the discussion. In particular, the paper will explore the praxis of cultural studies scholar and novelist Gail Jones whose interests in modernity, memory and image currently engage high school students in their final year of study.

Keywords: Memory, Australian literature, teaching curriculum, Gail Jones

This paper is a discursive exploration of the idea of cultural literacy. That is, the notion that important cultural discourses can be accessed through texts students study, in particular in New South Wales high schools. Rather than presenting a dialectical argument, the first half of the paper is an exploration of the idea of cultural literacy through reference to several key authors in the European literary tradition. In the second part of the paper I focus specifically on Australian author Gail Jones' post-modern use of the bildungsroman form for a study of modernism. In a sense, the purpose of my paper is to pay homage to Jones' uniquely *southern* novel, a text embraced by the students who study it. *Sixty Lights* positive reception by students reminds us that the effect of novels is at times quite alchemical and like some kabalistic correspondence, when a text resonates with us, we become both its advocate as well as personally involved in a process of ongoing enrichment that continues to operate long after we have finished the book itself. A text can be both personally compelling as well as collectively significant.

Yet before the 19th century standardization of English and the advent of the first lending libraries, acts of reading were accorded an elitist status that like their companion record-

keeping, formed an alliance of hegemonic control of a mass population unable to read. This meant that for most of the world and much of history, literacy was a foreign country. Even in 1929, after a century had passed, Virginia Woolf was to write a description of her own books on the shelves of the Cambridge University Library, a place where as a woman, she wasn't allowed entry.

At the recent Australian English Teachers Association Conference in Sydney (2012), researcher and academic Jackie Manuel presented the findings of a range of studies of teenage reading habits that show how reading and the enjoyment of it is were adversely affected when teachers take away choices or teach to the test. The books young adults prefer are most often not those selected by teachers as worthy of study but the ones they read independently. Manuel commented on the importance of these findings to educators, pointing out that there is, then, a relational nature between reading and the sense of being as an individual. On what basis then, she asked, should teachers select and arrange any group of texts so that they communicate significance and relevance to students. If this challenge can be met, can we then create learning communities that go far beyond the educational institution.

Bill Green says that English is primarily concerned with "locating the self." This language of place speaks to the idea of *Looking Back to Look Forward* and reminds us that important discourses of the past have never left us. They continue into the present and beyond. Important revolutions in how we human beings see ourselves; how we define what it is to be human; our ontological and epistemological relationships, have taken place over the last several hundred years, and each of them simultaneously continues to exist in the modern world. The Feudal, The Renaissance, The Enlightenment, The Romantic Revolution, Modernity and Post-modernity: all of them remain potent and affective. In terms of educational contexts then, forming a curricula that is built out of texts that embody and engage with the pivotal moments when such profound re-imaginings took place would seem a useful way of assisting high school students, those between twelve and eighteen years of age, to understand the discourses around them. Such an approach would have a sense of relevance for students to locate themselves from the place where they are; thus looking back as well as forwards out of a sense of real cultural literacy.

An example can be found in Chaucer's innovative writing of *The Canterbury Tales*. This song cycle, written in the English language at a time where Latin & French were standard for publication, not only embodied a satiric critique of authority in the 1300's but also connected English as a written form to a literary tradition whose origins were in the classical world. In the same act of writing Chaucer not only gave authenticity to English as a medium for expression, he wrote to include a readership of the new middle classes who, through access to written story making and story sharing, formed part of a shift away from the fixed social positions everyone and thing was allocated in The Great Chain of Being. *The Canterbury Tales* demonstrates the ways a text can exist in a paratactical relationship to its context. Mirroring, critiquing and thereby intervening in a sort of post-feudal space, the written text not only reflects social change and concerns of the period but also is a kind of cultural artifact. For instance, in *The Pardoner's Tale*, a satire of hypocrisies and abuses

of church personnel cuts close to the bone, Chaucer's audiences would be well aware of the association of Rounceville with corrupt church officials.

In the late 1960's John Berger famously said, "Critique is always a form of intervention..." Berger was referring to the role of critics in defense of art, however the statement can also be applied as a way of approaching our understanding of how to understand the social purposes of texts. When we study Shakespeare's 37 plays for example, we (like Shakespeare) investigate the ideological world that straddles the 16th and 17th centuries. Their engagement is with the issues of the Elizabethan Renaissance; a change in the monarchy, such as *Macbeth*; colonization and the confrontation with the other in *The Tempest*; the politics of court: the uses of 'history' in *Richard III*, or the then 'new' interest in the classical and contemporary worlds of Greece and Rome (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Julius Caesar* and even *Romeo & Juliet*). In a sense, Shakespeare embodies a post-Renaissance commentary much as does Chaucer for his own context.

The Renaissance spooled into the Enlightenment where there was, arguably, a fundamental shift privileging reason over belief: from myth to rationality as explanation system of the human being and its place in the universe.

I suggest that the *post*-Enlightenment is represented through the work we associate with the Romantic Revolution where, out of a powerful politicized individualism, artists -poets and novelists in particular- critiqued the limitations of reason, science, exploration and indeed the pathology of categorization. No longer would Shakespeare be spelt differently every time it was written. Part of this process of categorization included the standardization of English and the mass-production and distribution of the novel: particularly the gothic romance. When Wordsworth & Coleridge prefaced *Lyrical Ballads* with a manifesto championing the culturally specific, they foreshadowed post-modern concerns with location and context and the importance of individual stories and voices. Wordsworth & Coleridge were among many Romantics concerned that the triumph of narrative and the popularity of the lending libraries would be to the cost and disappearance of poetry. They feared that regional English myths and languages too would be lost and set about renewing them through their own work. Keats' sonnet "On Looking Into Chapman's Homer" ignores accuracy when representing the 'discovery' of the Pacific: Cortez was not the person and Darien was not the place. Keats' focus is that the discovery of the Pacific; that the globe doubles one's vision and halves one's assumptions; is equal to the discovery of the imaginative breath of the ancient composer Homer.

The Romantics championed freedom of speech, the end of slavery and the establishment of the American nation and French Republic. Forming a nexus between art and politics, these artists represent a social discourse that has been a powerful ongoing contributor to the way we continue to think of individual agency. But most of all, the Romantic Revolution established perhaps for the first time the idea that part of our humanity is evidenced through creating. Peter Watson says:

This was a basic shift in the very meaning of individuality and was totally new.
In the first instance and for the first time, it was realized that morality was a

creative process but in the second place, and no less important, it laid a new emphasis on creation, and this ... elevates the artist alongside the scientist. It is the artist who creates, who expresses himself, who creates values... In creating, the artist invents his goal and then realizes his own path towards that goal. (Watson 2005: 827-8)

Listening to this rendering of Romanticism is like engaging in a futuristic archaeology of the sort Ursula Le Guin describes in her novel *Always Coming Home*. Thus, when we "imagine and reach the people who might be going to have lived a long, long time from... [then]", we may well find that the subjects the Romantics chose were postmodern, existential, charting the unconscious: modern.

Crosshatched with Romanticism in the shaping of contemporary consciousness is the advent of modernity. In the next part of this paper I focus on Australian novelist and academic Gail Jones' *Sixty Lights*, a text where modernism is made a subject and means for expression.

In a new translation of Rimbaud's *Illuminations* in *The New York Review of Books*, the translator John Ashberry provides insights into modernism. In the preface to the book he says that "the crystalline jumble of Rimbaud's *Illuminations* are like a disordered collection of magic lantern slides," each "an intense and rapid dream", that are, in Ashberry's words, "still emitting pulses." If we are absolutely modern -and we are- it is because Rimbaud commanded us to be. These tropes of narrative order, the invention of the wondrous magic lantern show of the 1800's and all its relations, photography in particular but film too, now pervade culture. And as Ashberry says, they are "intense and of the order of a dreamscape." Ashberry defines Rimbaud's vision of just what modernity means as follows: "essentially, absolute modernity was for him (Rimbaud) the acknowledging of the simultaneity of all of life, the condition that nourishes poetry at every second" (Ashberry 2011: 16).

Like Rimbaud, many modernists articulated the ways theory and practice walked hand in hand; mostly, according to David Trotter in his essay *The Modernist Novel*, in terms of what they were against. Trotter says, "Many, if not most plots, and certainly those favoured by the great nineteenth-century realists, turn on moments of revelation, recognition scenes, when the illusions nurtured by timidity, prejudice, or habit fall away, and a naked self confronts a naked world. These are moments when identity is begun, renewed or completed" (Trotter 2011: 93). In contrast, modernist authors like Henry James and Joseph Conrad and later, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce established "centres of consciousness through which the apprehension of events were filtered" (70) and "were more interested in cumulative models of selfhood" (93). We need only to think of *Ulysses* or *The Waves* or much earlier than both of these, *Heart of Darkness*. The sense that experimentation in voice and form was taking place still strikes one in the pages of *Mrs Dalloway* for example. The modernists rejected the realism and the omniscient authority of the author as inadequate. Quite often their focus was on the nature of a single moment, in elliptical narratives they layered in palimpsests of memory and place in a theatre made of consciousness.

This exploration of the single moment, together with the sense of simultaneous rupture and loss, is at the heart of the changes that gave rise to the modern world in the nineteenth century, and is a preoccupation of novelist and academic Gail Jones whose novel *Sixty Lights* is currently set for study in the Higher School Certificate, the final year of study for high school students in New South Wales.

The protagonist in Jones' coming of age story is Lucy Strange who, we are told in the opening chapter of the novel, will "meet her death -in a few years time, at the age of twenty two" (Jones: 2005. 4). This young woman is at various times in the novel referred to as an anachronistic character, a photographer who wishes to capture the maculate, the fleeting, shadows of her mother's face which she can not recall. Lucy Strange exists in the middle of the nineteenth century: she and photography are born together.

"Error and chance," she says of her own photographs, "these are beautiful things." To Lucy photographs were art-in-the-age-of-mechanical-production... "This one," said Lucy, pointing to a portrait of [her brother Thomas' wife] Violet...sitting by a window with a book in her hand... "is special." The right side of the print was overtaken by a circle of white light... "Halation, This is called ... a flooding of light. A perceptible halo."
"A technical mistake," her lover Jacob, a painter says.
"Yes, perhaps. The Royal College of photographers would certainly deplore it. But to me it seems the loveliest accident. It shows us the force of radiance, its omnipresence." (Jones 2005: 239)

It is Lucy's fascination with light -writing and the afterlife of the image- that Jones is exploring throughout the novel.

In *Victorian Babylon*, author Lynda Nead represents the process of modernity as phoenix-like. Arising out of the destruction of the old, the modern is a reminder of the old, the past, in the same way as a photograph, as Roland Barthes says, is the site where the modern and the unmodern meet: the making of ghosts - of the uncapturable past forever with us. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the London Lucy (though she was born in Australia), comes 'home' to was in a more or less permanent dust haze as a new infrastructure, including the tube and sewers, projected out of the spaces where the old has been torn down. The project of modernising, says Nead, is never ending: the modern is the ever new. Thus we are always creating a sense of irreconcilable loss. Jones may not be saying this is a bad thing either. In another novel, *Dreams of Speaking*, she represents Hiroshima as a city of light where, like a photograph, the flash of the atomic bomb forever imprints on the retina of humanity. (Roughley: 2007. 57)

After Lucy is diagnosed with consumption, she draws upon the lexicon and experience of modernity to imagine her body: "She saw, above all, a kind of city, all caves and pipelines and underground tubes, rather like the ones engineers were now creating under the streets of London - the Metropolitan, they called it, a dark new geography. One she had stumbled upon workers emerging from a gape in the street; they had skin made of earth and looked

like a fraternity of the underworld. She saw them blink and look lost. They wiped their faces with rags. Bog men. Lazarus men. Creatures of sub-London dark” (189).

A range of theorists inform Gail Jones’ work including Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag. In particular, Eduardo Cadava’s brief essays collectively titled *Words of Light*, in which Cadava explores Walter Benjamin’s ideas about photography, ‘light’ and ‘writing’ have helped give shape to *Sixty Lights*. And, unlike Susan Sontag, who in her famous essay *On Photography*, sees photography as being associated with the spectacle of loss, grieving and melancholy, Jones offers an insightful meditation on the contemporary through the trope of photography. She represents photography as life affirming and representative of time, “elongated ... concertina shaped ... pleated” (Jones 2005: 242). For Jones, there is something representational about photograph and *Sixty Lights* has been called “snapshots in prose” (Dixon 2009: 39).

There are perhaps two reasons why *Sixty Lights* is embraced and valued by the students who study the novel. One is their own contemporary and active engagement with photography, recording and storing the ephemeral; on i-phones, in clouds, on public media, in memory: the phenomena of photography is ubiquitous.

The second reason concerns Gail Jones’ ability to represent modernity so that it makes meaningful our sense of the present. Jones is thinking through and relocating the perceptions of European theorists such as Maurice Blanchot, Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida into her southern seeing of the mid-nineteenth century: “rehears[ing] a constellation of themes,” she has called it. What does it mean to her, a woman growing up “on a former quarantine station, a remote settlement of three buildings on a peninsula in the Kimberleys” that she calls “a kind of emancipated space ... deterritorialised, without markers of stable being, unbounded, ambiguous, indivisibly spacious and full” (Jones 2006: 14)? In *Sixty Lights*, Jones wanted to mimic a modernist text with its focus on subjectivity, memory and time through an elliptical and paratactical structure wherein the journeys characters take, from Australia to England, chart the trade routes of empire from the south to the north following the “multidirectional flow of people, money and ideas...[which have shaped Australia]” (Roughley 2007: 57). So while Lucy and Thomas travel in a reverse journey of their mother’s voyage to Australia, and which mirrors that of their parent’s honeymoon to Florence, it is also one “that is shaped by the globalising forces of colonialism and modernity” (Jones 2005: 57). Jones has said that *Sixty Lights* is

a backwards-looking text, a memory text, so it appears to be mimicking a Victorian novel to have a solid plot that progresses from childhood to death, a *Bildungsroman*, that kind of very traditional or conservative notion of how a text is shaped.

I wanted [she says] to suggest that the experience of living, especially living with distress or with suffering of others that is not fully assimilated, does fracture or rupture the experience of time, so that I punctuate my book with images that stand alone ...[and] cause a moment of stasis in the book. So the whole text, I hope, is anachronistic, it has a mimicry of Victorian time but is in

fact a modernist text. It is about the time that comes into being with photographic meaning. (Interview with Koval 2005:1)

This paper began with a consideration of the alchemical properties of texts and proceeded to consider shifts in culture that have been augmented through acts of reading and writing. To a contemporary Australian reader, in particular students completing their final year of secondary schooling, *Sixty Lights* provides the opportunity to consider and reflect on the discourses and stories that have preoccupied and shaped their society and lives these last hundred and fifty years. It also provides a space to explore Walter Benjamin's observation that

memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre... It is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred ... The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised and is never seen again. (Benjamin 1979: 314)

Students are interested in reading, in learning. The freshness of looking backwards and witnessing the conceptual language of the contemporary being born makes keen sense of the present people that we are.

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